Resource Guide to

COMING OUT

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION

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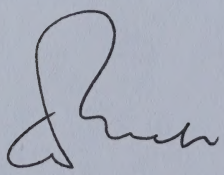
GIVE YOURSELF AN OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE ...

Some of the most difficult and important decisions in the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people relate to "coming out" — that is, deciding to be honest about our sexual orientation or gender expression or identity. The fact is that we are everywhere, and more of us each day are deciding to live honestly. This is so critical to our community because the only way we will stop the discrimination we face is to reveal our true selves to our friends, our families and our neighbors — and our elected officials, who have the power to change the laws that affect our lives.

National polls have shown that people who know someone who is lesbian or gay are far more likely to support equal rights for all gay people. And we know from stories that we hear that the same is true for people who know a bisexual or transgender person. Coming out may be one step in the life of a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person but it contributes to a giant leap for all GLBT people, today and in the future.

Let me assure you that being an openly gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person in this society is not always easy. But it is so much more gratifying than being in the closet. Hiding information and worrying that someone will discover your secret consumes a lot of personal energy. It also detracts from the quality of your life. No one should be denied the opportunity to thrive and flourish as a full human being because his or her sexual orientation or gender expression or identity is different from others.



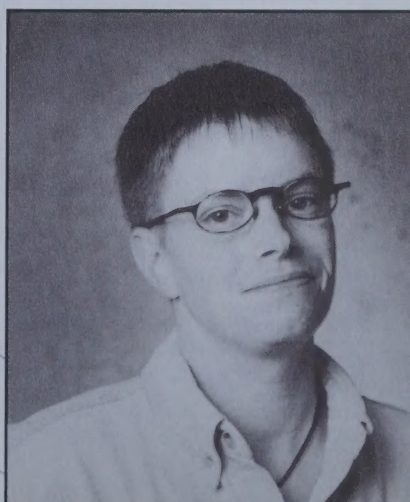
Elizabeth Birch
Executive Director
Human Rights Campaign

... IT'S THE MOST POWERFUL THING YOU CAN DO.

I've been fortunate to have been able to meet thousands of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people across the country. All have stories to tell of the challenges they overcame to be true to themselves. Many say their own coming out processes would have been easier if they had had somewhere to go for accurate, supportive information. We hope that the Human Rights Campaign's *Resource Guide to Coming Out* is a good starting point for that journey.

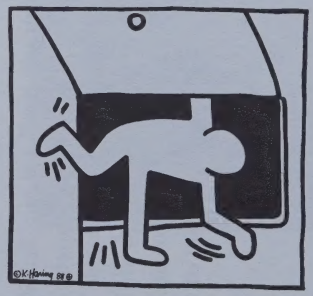
HRC's National Coming Out Project is an ongoing effort to promote honesty and openness about being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender on campus, in the workplace and in the community. It is an extension of National Coming Out Day — which a group of activists founded after the extraordinary gay and lesbian march on Washington in 1987. They agreed that GLBT people needed to be visible — that equality could not be achieved from the closet. As a result, National Coming Out Day — Oct. 11 — was born. The goal? To educate America about the lives of GLBT people and celebrate the community's achievements. Today, the National Coming Out Project's public education and outreach programs open a dialogue with gay and straight Americans and urge GLBT people to come out and get involved.

As you experience the coming out process, remember one important thing — you are not alone. Others just like you, in towns and cities across the country and around the world, are on the same journey. We hope that this guide and its resources will provide some direction. Coming out is still the single most powerful thing you can do to turn ignorance into understanding. You are empowering yourself — and helping to educate those around you.



Candace J. Gingrich
Manager
HRC's National Coming Out Project

RESOURCE GUIDE TO COMING OUT



INTRODUCTION

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Wilson Cruz

Being attracted to someone of the same sex or understanding that your gender identity is different from your biological sex can be frightening — so much so that you may deny your feelings. But soon the feelings arise again. You try to put them out of your mind but you can't. Finally, you stop resisting, and in that instant, your world changes. You discover that being true to yourself feels better — more natural — than denying your true self ever did. But what will this mean for you and for the rest of your life?

Certainly, life is more challenging if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. You will be required to develop the courage to honor your own experience of love and self-identification above anyone else's judgments about it. But you can do it. And, when you are ready, you can take the next step — you can come out. Millions of people have done so — and many say it was the best thing they ever did.

Being honest with yourself

From birth, most of us have been raised to think of ourselves as heterosexual and as the gender that corresponds with our biological sex. Our parents, our families, our teachers, our friends — and seemingly our entire culture — told us that a day would arrive when we would meet someone of the opposite sex and get married. Very few of us are told that we might fall in love with someone of the same sex. And virtually all of us are strongly discouraged from identifying more with another gender. That's why so many of us are shocked or confused when it happens.

And other cultural factors come into play — in a big way. "I was taught from early on that Latinos and people of color are looked down on," says actor Wilson Cruz, who is Puerto Rican. "To be homosexual on top of that is one more thing people can look down on us for. ... There are certain expectations of what a man is supposed to be, and when you don't fit into those molds, you're seen as less than worthy of your race," said Cruz, who appeared in *My So-Called Life, Party of Five* and the Broadway production of *Rent.* "But I've learned there are certain expectations you will never live up to, and you have to get to the point where that's OK."

Many people identify as gay or lesbian because their primary attractions — both emotional and physical — are to members of the same sex. Many people who are attracted to both men and women identify as bisexual. Some transgender people say they felt like they were trapped in the wrong body

for as long as they can remember. And sometimes people don't feel comfortable with any of these labels or they choose a mix of them. The important thing is to be honest with yourself and — when you're ready — to be honest with others about who you are and to whom you are attracted.

Figuring out who you are can be very difficult — and it can take time. Remember, however, that most of those negative stereotypes of GLBT people you may have heard are based on erroneous or inadequate information. And what you need are the facts.

WHAT DOES TRANSGENDER MEAN?

Transgender is a term that describes a broad range of people who experience and/or express their gender somewhat differently from what most people expect. It is an overarching term that includes transsexual people and cross-dressers as well as anyone expressing gender characteristics that don't correspond with characteristics traditionally ascribed to the person's sex or presumed sex. It is not a sexual orientation. Some transgender people may define themselves as female-to-male or male-to-female transsexual, and may take hormones prescribed by a doctor and undergo medical procedures for sex reassignment surgery. And some people identify as transgender because they don't feel comfortable with either the male or female gender exclusively.

Transsexual is a medical term describing people whose gender and sex do not line up, and who often seek medical treatment to bring their body and gender identity into alignment. Cross-dressers identify as their gender at birth but sometimes dress in clothing of the opposite gender. Transvestite is a psychiatric term describing men and women who cross-dress for sexual gratification. Many people, however, do not cross-dress for that reason, but do so to express their transgender nature — and prefer the terms cross-dresser, drag king or drag queen.

Whatever you feel most comfortable with, it's important to realize that gender varies and many people don't fit neatly into one narrow definition. Further, many transgender and transsexual people are gay, lesbian or bisexual.

THE FACTS about Sexuality and Gender Identity

No one knows how many people are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The most reputable estimates are skewed by the fact that many people are afraid or unwilling during surveys to identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender — even when assured of anonymity. Whatever the numbers, the facts are the same:

Your Sexuality or Gender Identity Is Not a Choice. It Chooses You.

Some people say that sexuality or gender identity is a choice to discourage you from gay or lesbian relationships or from being comfortable with expressing your gender in the way that feels right to you. But think about it for a minute: Did you choose to have feelings of same-sex attraction? Did you choose your sex at birth? Sexuality and gender identity are not choices any more than being left-handed or having brown eyes or being heterosexual are choices. They are a part of who you are. The choice is in deciding how to live your life.

It's OK to Be Yourself.

In the 1970s, the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association revised their positions on homosexuality. Both determined that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. In 1994, the American Medical Association released a statement saying, "Most of the emotional disturbance experienced by gay men and lesbians around their sexual identity is not based on physiological causes but rather is due more to a sense of alienation in an unaccepting environment."

Nonetheless, some people might try to tell you that you are sick and that you need professional help to "change." No scientifically valid evidence exists that shows that people can change their sexual orientation, although some people do repress it. The most reputable medical and psychotherapeutic groups say you should not try to change your sexual orientation.

WHAT DOES GLBT MEAN?

GLBT is an acronym for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. We will use it throughout the publication.

Most important, remember that the problems people have dealing with their sexuality come from society and its treatment of GLBT people — not from being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. It's OK to seek help in dealing with the confusing feelings you may have about your sexual orientation or your gender identity. Understanding and being honest with yourself as well as coming out are critical milestones in life. As with any other significant step in your life, you might seek professional help through the process. Just remember: The anxiety you are feeling is primarily the result of family or social prejudice against GLBT people.

Being Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender Is Natural.

You've probably heard some people say that men are "meant" to be with women, and women are "meant" to be with men — or that you should be a "real man" or be more "feminine." They may say that unless you are straight, you are going against nature and morality. But if being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is unnatural, why would it occur, generation after generation, despite some cultures' strong prohibitions? The fact is same-sex love and gender variance has occurred throughout history, in every nation and culture. They are natural variations among humans, and may have occurred somewhere in your own family's history. When people say being GLBT is unnatural, they mean it is against their *preconceived idea* of, or conditioned assumptions about, what is natural.

Being Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual or Transgender Is Not a "Lifestyle." It's a Life.

It's sometimes said that GLBT people live a gay "lifestyle," a word chosen to trivialize us and to imply that all of us subscribe to the same values, characteristics and dreams. The fact is that the GLBT community is as diverse as the population at large. Some of us have one lifelong relationship; some have many relationships. We come from many different races and cultures. Some of us are liberal; some are conservative. Some are affluent; some are poor.

GLBT People Constitute Families.

Some people talk as if there are two options in life: You can marry someone of the opposite sex and become a family or you can be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender and be excluded from the definition of family. This is patently untrue. Further, it is a position perpetuated by religious political extremists who have a stake in portraying GLBT people as outside the mainstream. The fact is that GLBT people make up families just as other people do.

And if you dream about having children, you certainly can do so if you're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Many GLBT people have children through adoption, alternative insemination, surrogacy arrangements or previous relationships. In addition, scientific research to date has shown that children of gay and lesbian parents are as mentally healthy as children raised by heterosexual parents. Research collected on transgender parents shows that there is no evidence that a parent's gender identity affects the gender identity of their children, according to the *International Journal of Transgenderism* (October 1998). Most important, parenting experts agree: Children need love and support. There's no reason that GLBT parents cannot give their children the same support and love that heterosexual parents can.

If you dream about having children, you certainly can do so if you're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

In 2002, the American Academy of Pediatrics came out in support of legal protections for same-sex parents and their children. The American Psychological Association, Child Welfare League of America and North American Council on Adoptable Children also have issued statements in support of gay and lesbian parents.

However, GLBT families often are not protected under law like married couples. Thus, there are special considerations for you to make when you decide to have a child or when you and your partner commit to one another. If you are coming out as transgender or transsexual and you already have children, there are additional considerations. If you want to learn more about GLBT families and get documents to protect your family, visit *www.hrc.org/familynet.*

AM I BISEXUAL?

Bisexual people are attracted to both men and women. A bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, however, and the degree of attraction may vary over time as one's sexual identity develops. No "test" exists to determine whether you are bisexual. Some people acknowledge their bisexuality after a period of identifying as gay or lesbian.

At first, you may not know what to call your sexual feelings or whether you feel sufficiently attracted to both sexes to consider yourself bisexual — but there's no measuring stick to decide what amount of attraction to other genders is necessary to identify as bisexual. In addition, you may hear some of the common myths about bisexual people — they can't make up their minds; they can't commit to long-term relationships. Don't listen. And don't feel you need to hurry into a decision. Coming out — whether you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender — is a precious journey.

COMING OUT

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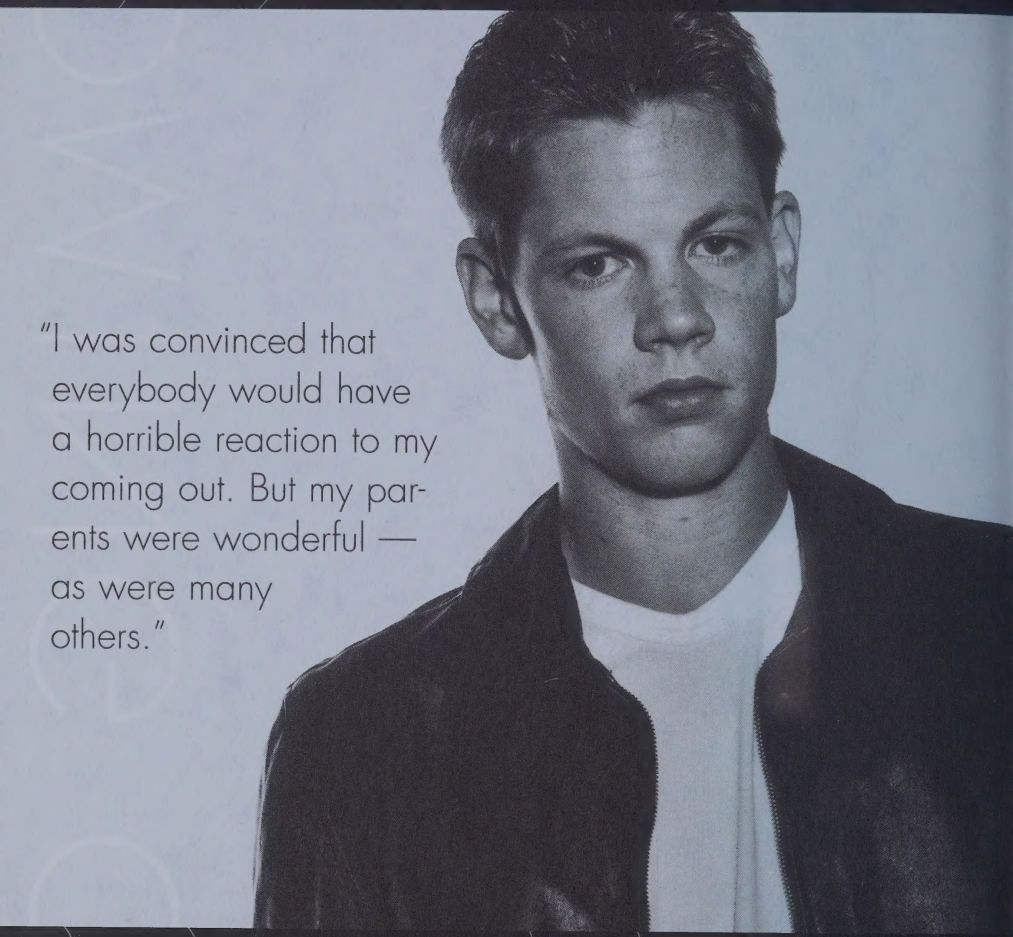


"I was convinced that everybody would have a horrible reaction to my coming out. But my parents were wonderful — as were many others."

Christopher Rice

Coming out means identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The first person you have to reveal this to is yourself. After that, you can deal with friends and family. For many people, the coming out process is difficult. But most people come out because, sooner or later, they can't stand hiding who they are any more. Once they've come out, most people acknowledge that it feels much better to be open and honest than to conceal such an integral part of themselves.

Coming out is simply about being true to yourself — in a world where nearly everyone assumes you are straight. It's not about bringing attention to yourself, as some critics like to say, according to Christopher Rice, author and son of well-known novelist Anne Rice. "People say, 'But you don't have to advertise or flaunt your sexuality if you're gay,'" says Rice, who is gay. "Well, there's a big difference between being forthright and 'flaunting' it."

Sometimes, the overwhelmingly heterosexual society we live in affects our ability to deal with the possibility of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. For Rice, the biggest hurdle in coming out was his own fear about being different. "I came to understand that one of the biggest hang-ups was me. I was convinced everybody would have a horrible reaction to my coming out. But my parents were wonderful — as were many others. Certainly, there was a wide spectrum of reactions — of highly tolerant to not very tolerant. But mostly, I was just projecting onto them my own insecurities."

Early on, in fact, Rice believed he was just going through a "phase." Throughout his teens, he went out with girls, and talked about eventually settling down with a woman. At the same time, he read books — portrayals of gay people leading real lives. And he continued talking with friends and thinking about his same-sex attractions. But when he had his first romantic involvement with a man, everything clicked.

"It really felt right — it felt natural. It felt more complete," recalls Rice. "And most of all, it felt too good to be something that I had to hide."

Understandably, it takes some time for many of us to reach the point where we feel comfortable enough about ourselves to share our discovery with others. But when we do take that step, our lives can change forever — most often, for the better. Before going away to college, Linda Villarosa was confused and unsure about her sexual orientation. One reason why she did not explore her feelings right away was because, at that time, she was trying to fit into a white neighborhood and didn't want to

Linda Villarosa

do anything others could think of as wrong. Finally, after she left for school, she took the step. "I came out because I couldn't stand not being myself any more."

After college, she came out to 7 million readers in an *Essence* article she wrote with her mother. The article, called "Coming Out," remains the most highly responded-to article in the history of the magazine. Villarosa later became executive editor of the magazine and is now a contributing writer to *The New York Times* and is the author of "Body & Soul: The Black Women's Guide to Physical Health and Emotional Well-Being."

"I came out because I couldn't stand not being myself anymore."

Similarly, many transgender and transsexual people come out to be true to themselves. But it still can be quite dangerous for some people to have their transgender status revealed, says writer/activist Jamison Green. "It's necessary for transpeople to be comfortable enough about their difference that they can make appropriate disclosures to others."

What is important is your own comfort level — as well as awareness of your own safety in various circumstances, says Green, a transsexual man. "Not all transpeople need to come out all the time." It's also important to find your own comfort level about how you want to express your gender. "There is no one way to be transgendered," he says. "Some of us just want to alleviate our body/gender misalignment and experience life as 'ordinary' men or women, whether we are gay, straight or bisexual.

"I knew everyone would watch me change from androgynous to masculine, from woman to man, and some people would be disgusted, some frightened and some derisive," he recalls. "I was amazed how much support I received, and I know it was because I was clear and calm and understanding when others were confused. I had to spend a lot of time answering questions; I was very patient with people, and I know that made a difference for them."

And remember, you are never too old to come out. Each of us comes out at the age that feels best — as teens or retirees — or somewhere in between. Support networks and sources of information remain the same

for all, although coming out at a later age may pose different challenges. Some people come out in middle age as they become more aware about how quickly their lives are passing, and the desire to find self-acceptance and happiness takes on greater urgency. You may have spent the first part of your life living up to other people's expectations of you. Now is the time to live up to your own expectations of yourself.

Coming Out to Yourself

"Growing up, I felt there was something about me that truly set me apart from other kids. But I didn't have a grasp on what it was," says Candace Gingrich, manager of HRC's National Coming Out Project and half-sister of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

"I had a few fleeting crushes on girls and, then, a full-blown crush. Inside, they felt right and normal. But at the same time, I didn't have any way to process those feelings because I didn't know any gay people or know that I knew them. I felt that I would risk something if I expressed my feelings."

Gingrich started playing on her college rugby team — which had some lesbian players — and for the first time saw women being openly affectionate to each other. "It was like being dropped into what was originally a foreign country but, once there, I realized it was my country of origin. I thought, 'Wow, the feelings I've been having are normal. It is OK to be who I am.'"

Whether or not you attend college, campuses often have GLBT-related organizations or activities for you to participate in.

At the same time, remember that it's not always easy to be out. It may take a few years to feel entirely comfortable, says Tracy Young, a disc jockey and music mixer, who has worked with Enrique Iglesias, Stevie Nicks, Ricky Martin, Anna Sui, Lauryn Hill and Madonna.

Young says it was hard for her during the initial years. "I was almost ashamed at times to be gay — in particular, if I was away from my friends and others who were supportive — and in more of a conservative environment. 'What if these people find out that I'm gay?' I would ask myself," said Young. "It's not always easy. Not everyone will accept you. Sometimes, people will call you names or give you looks when you walk down the street."

It was extremely important for Young to find others who were supportive or who were GLBT or questioning, she said. "Being around other gay people who had similar stories really helped," says Young. "Finding a gay support system was important." She also started reading books about being gay or lesbian when she was a young teen. "I think it's hard when you're

struggling with who you are. It can be a scary thing — but, in the end, always be true to yourself."

Coming Out Online

Thanks to the increased access to computers as well as the ease — and relative privacy — of Internet communications, increasing numbers of people are choosing to come out online. Chat rooms and other features allow Internet users to participate in online communities where they can be themselves — free of fear. Some are finding the environment to be so supportive that they are coming out online, before coming out to parents, coworkers and close friends.

Corey Johnson, a captain of his Massachusetts high school football team who made national headlines when he came out in 1999, used the Internet for support more than a year before telling anyone at home and at school. He regularly visited a website where he could communicate with other gay teens, including athletes like himself, who also were afraid to come out. And he exchanged e-mail messages with another gay football player in Illinois. Being able to hook up with others like him helped Johnson as he struggled with his sexuality, wondering if his family and friends would accept that part of him. The online communications helped him take the next step — telling a few of his teachers, his parents and his closest friends — and, finally, the other players on his football team.

"Wow, the feelings I've been having are normal. It is OK to be who I am."

Nationally known transgender activist Dana Rivers also is enthusiastic about resources available on the Internet. Accurate information about transgender issues is much harder to find than information related to gay, lesbian and bisexual issues. Gay bookstores and GLBT centers in local communities often fail to offer basic resources on such topics, says Rivers who is a transsexual woman. Internet chats can often help someone who is exploring the possibility of transitioning, for example, to gather more information and talk to someone who has gone through the experience.

While online communications can be invaluable, users need to remember to take care. It's important to exercise good judgment in deciding with

whom you share information. It's also key to verify and confirm any statistics or medical information with other reliable sources.

Dana Rivers

Coming Out to Others

Some people come out when someone asks them if they're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Others make a point of pulling people aside and saying, "There's something I have to tell you."

If you choose the latter option, ask yourself: "Who is the most open-minded and caring person I know who is also the least likely to be shocked, threatened or put off?" This might be a friend, a relative or a teacher. Tell that person you have questions about your sexual orientation or your gender identity, or that you're trying to be more honest and you'd like to talk. Say you've come to them because you trust them.

Corey Johnson, the openly gay high school football captain, first felt comfortable talking to his guidance counselor. Later, he shared the information with a biology teacher, then a lacrosse coach — and after that, his parents. All were supportive and were able to better understand his recent mood swings and falling grades.

Like Johnson, you may want to consider talking to a school counselor, a supportive teacher, a member of a GLBT student group or a therapist. The student groups widely known as gay-straight alliances exist in a number of high schools and colleges — and often include straight students who are supportive of their GLBT and questioning classmates. Some large cities have GLBT community centers. In addition, several national hotlines are available. Look in the back of this guide for those numbers and other resources.

For those who are transgender, it also can be helpful to contact national groups that focus specifically on transgender-related issues, including Gender Education and Advocacy (*www.gender.org*), GenderPAC (*www.gpac.org*) and the International Foundation for Gender Education (*www.ifge.org*). Local chapters of national groups often have knowledgeable, supportive members in cities across the country who are available to talk, Dana Rivers says.

The student groups widely known as **gay-straight alliances** exist in a number of high schools and colleges.

Testing the Waters

You can get a sense of how accepting your friends and family are by the things they say, or don't say, when gay- or transgender-related issues come up. You might try to bring it up yourself by talking about such issues in the news, in films, on radio or television shows, or in the debates over equal rights in the workplace.

If the reactions from your friends or members of your family are positive, the chances are that they'll be more accepting of you. But always keep in mind that it's easier for most people to accept GLBT people in the abstract. It's a bit different when it's "my son" or "my daughter" or even "my best friend."

A word of caution: It's always a risk to come out. You never can know how anyone will react — because our society, throughout history, has been full of positive images of heterosexual people and bereft of positive images of GLBT people. There's a good chance that people will judge you based on those images, no matter how open-minded you might think they are. On the other hand, it is often surprising who among your friends and families are the most supportive.

A word of caution: It's always a risk to come out.

It's a big risk to come out for transgender people, says Dana Rivers, who lost her job as a teacher when she came out. And, more than likely, transgender people cannot conceal who they are from people that knew them before transitioning. "You just cannot hide what you are as a female-to-male or a male-to-female transsexual," says Rivers. It can also be uncomfortable to be transgender in the gay community because some members remain ignorant of gender-related issues and fail to accept transgender people, she notes.

What is key, however, is simply being authentic — when the time is right, Rivers says. "Everyone needs to make their own decision about when to come out. It is important for people, especially those I am close to, to know about this dramatic, profound shift in my life."

Telling Friends

When you are ready to come out to your friends, you may be lucky enough to have some friends or acquaintances in the GLBT community to

help you — to give you some support, lend you a book that helped them on their journey or simply share a few words of advice. Heterosexual friends also can be staunch supporters. Choose carefully as you reveal this fundamental part of yourself.

For comedian Suzanne Westenhoefer, one of the hardest parts of the entire process was dealing with the reactions of some of her friends. When she came out in college, Westenhoefer and her friends faced a barrage of mean-spirited remarks from other students. "They took an obvious dislike to us. It was hateful, horrible rhetoric — and divisive," she said. In the end, some of Westenhoefer's friends stopped spending time with her. "I lost some friends. I felt like they just couldn't step up to the plate. It was very hard — really hard — to deal with that, and to tell them that they were not being supportive."

Many gay people find that the friends they thought would be least judgmental were the first to drop them, while those who seemed unlikely allies offered the strongest support. But you'll learn many valuable lessons about what the word "friendship" means. "It's those first five minutes in coming out to your friends or acquaintances that are really the hardest. But after that — things get better than before," says Westenhoefer.

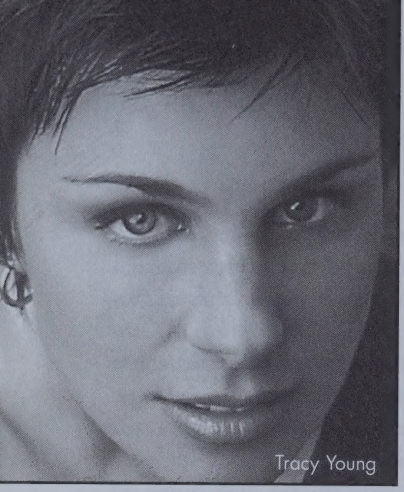
> "I lost some friends. I felt like they just couldn't step up to the plate."

Westenhoefer feels so strongly about the importance of coming out that after each of her stand-up comedy performances she encourages members of her audiences to take the time to do so with friends, family members — everyone.

"The most important thing you can do is come out. People's hearts have to change — and when a person meets someone who is gay, that more than anything seems to make them understand and take on new attitudes," she says.

Suzanne Westenhoefer

And attitudes can and do change — quite extensively. Tracy Young admits that hers did. Young, one of the country's leading disc jockeys and music mixers, recalls recoiling in disgust when two of her closest friends came out to her in high school and told her they were in a relationship. "I just freaked out. I


Tracy Young

told my mother that two of my friends were together." Her mom proceeded to explain to her, however, that her friends' feelings for each other were OK. "She told me they were my friends — and asked why I was turning my back on them." Young was supportive after that — and eventually met and fell in love with a woman.

Telling Family Members

Most people are afraid that their parents will reject them if they come out. You might be afraid that they will throw you out of the house, tell you you're immoral, or simply stop loving you. The good news is that you're probably wrong.

It's true that many parents are shocked when their children say they're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. But it is also true that for many parents, it's very hard to completely reject their children. Some parents react in ways that hurt. Some cry. Some get angry. Some ask where they went wrong as a parent. Some call it a sin. Some insist it's a phase. Others try to send their child to counselors or therapists who attempt to change gay people into heterosexuals — a process rejected by all major medical and mental health professional organizations. Some parents send their child to counselors or therapists who try to change gender-variant people.

"Mom wanted to know if I hadn't met the right man yet."

Candace Gingrich's mother was pretty typical. "She wanted to know what happened to me that turned me into a lesbian," Gingrich recalls. "She wanted to know where she and Dad went wrong. She wanted to know if I hadn't met the right man yet."

Initially, comedian Suzanne Westenhoefer's mother also was upset and confused because Westenhoefer had been dating boys for several years before she figured out she was gay. "She couldn't understand that I could date guys, like them and yet decide I was a lesbian. And it also went against the old myth that lesbians hate men," she said. It took her mother several months to come to terms with the news. "Then my mother went through a period of being worried about my safety because of 'all

the people who don't like queers' — and that I would spend my life in dark bars." She also worried whether she and her daughter would remain close, as they always had been. Within a year or so, however, Westenhoefer's mother came to accept her. She was soon including Westenhoefer's girlfriend in family activities.

Remember that your parents grew up in a time when some of the misperceptions about GLBT people were more prevalent than they are today. Remember, too, that they're probably trying to keep you safe from something they do not understand. Finally, remember this is big news, and there's really no time schedule for how long it takes parents to adjust. Some take months. Some take years. And, of course, some already know.

Remember this is big news, and there's really no time schedule for how long it takes parents to adjust.

Many people have questions when you come out to them. You might want to be prepared by showing them this booklet or another similar resource. For a list of books and online resources, visit HRC's National Coming Out Project at *www.hrc.org/ncop*. Many communities have local chapters of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or PFLAG.

Fortunately, parents seem to be more accepting of their children now than ever, but some parents still go to the extreme. For actor Wilson Cruz, it was awful. His father threw him out.

"I lived in my car for three months," Cruz recalls. For a year, he and his father barely talked. Then one night, *My So-Called Life* aired an episode in which Cruz's character was thrown out of his house for being gay. Cruz's father was watching.

"He called me up after that, and it was very moving. He saw what I went through on an emotional and a physical level, and started to see what he'd done wrong. Now, I wouldn't say it's a complete transformation but he's definitely a lot more accepting of me."

While Cruz's experience was more dramatic than most, it shows that even people who react negatively at first can come around in time — and sometimes become your strongest supporters. It may not be easy for you to give them this time. But don't be discouraged. In the long run, nothing helps as much as patience.

"My biggest fear was that my parents would abandon me if I was honest with them," recalls author Linda Villarosa. "But my mother asked me point-blank: 'Are you a lesbian?' I wasn't comfortable lying. I was also caught off guard. I was so happy. For one split second, I thought, 'They'll be happy for me.'"

Instead, her father cried because he was afraid she didn't love him any more. And her mother demanded that she go to therapy. "She said, 'This isn't really who you are. This is a phase. You can change. You can go to therapy.' But I said, 'No, this is who I am, and I'm happy.'"

While it took time, Villarosa says her family finally let go of the fantasy of the person they thought she was and came to accept the real Linda Villarosa. She and her mother enjoy a close relationship, and Villarosa's mother is helping Linda raise her two children.

Coming Out to Your Children

Children always want to know the truth about their parents' sexual orientation and may already know before being told, says Felicia Park-Rogers, director of Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere and an expert on HRC FamilyNet, the organization's web channel for GLBT families. But children are not always happy about the news. It's a tremendous change to have a parent come out — particularly if it accompanies a divorce. Emotions such as anger, sadness and confusion may emerge. Most of all, children have lots of questions.

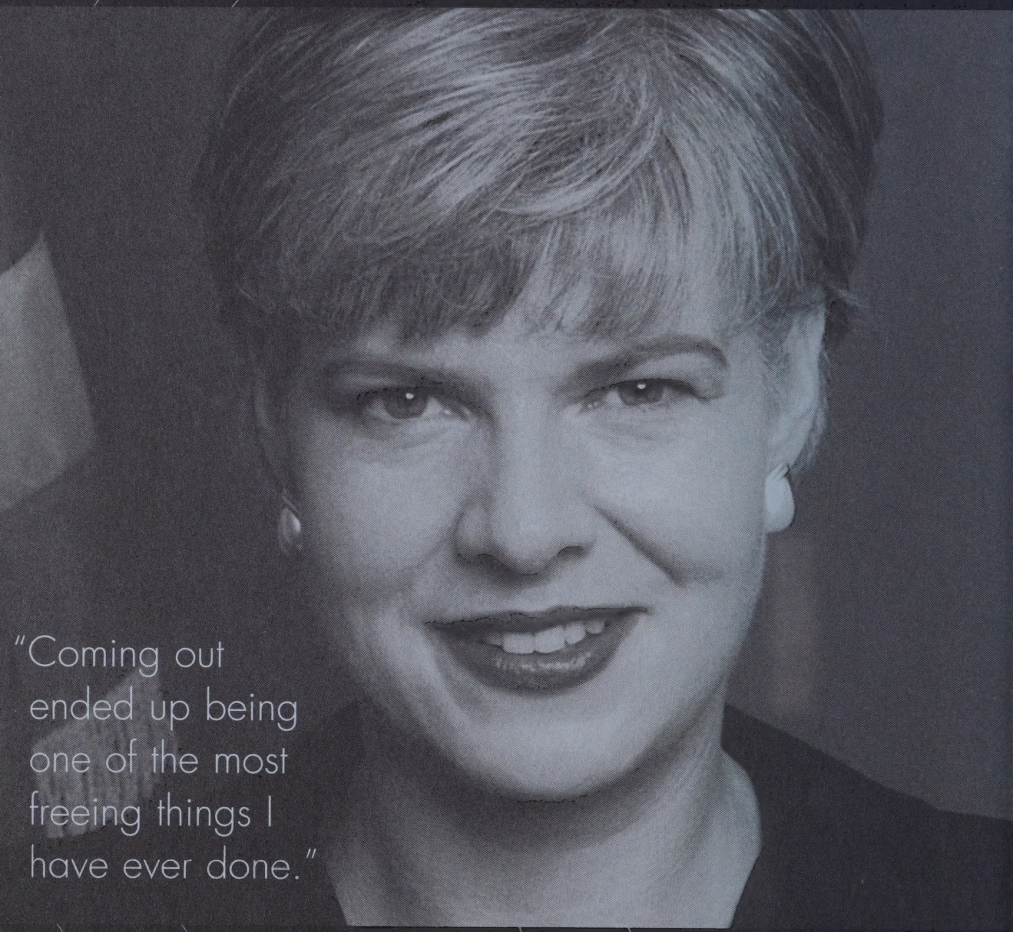
You (and, potentially, your partner) need to make a judgment about whether and when to tell your children. Here are some helpful hints:

- Tell your children in a private space where the conversation will be entirely confidential.
- Allow for plenty of time to continue the conversation over the next few days and weeks — and years.
- Explain your sexuality or gender shift in an age-appropriate way.
- Reassure your children that you love them and that they are your top priority.
- Connect them with other children of GLBT parents. Let them know that they are part of a caring community.

Want to know more? See *www.hrc.org/familynet.*

A Lifelong JOURNEY

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION



Tammy Baldwin

Coming out to yourself, your friends and families is a huge part of the journey toward being honest about your sexual orientation. But coming out is more than just telling those close to you. It is a challenging process that continues throughout your life and across all of its facets, as the following sections indicate. Many opportunities will arise where you will need to choose whether to come out as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person — whether it's on the job, at a church picnic, while having a conversation on the bus or when filling out a form in your doctor's office. Almost daily, you will face having to make decisions about when and where to come out. But remember, take as much time as you need — this is your journey. And be sure to find help via local support groups or online contacts. If you are transgender, this kind of support is critical because of the particular challenges you face.

Coming Out in the Workplace

One of the biggest risks you may face is coming out on the job. It's a decision that has the potential to affect your livelihood because there is no federal law that protects you from being fired merely because you're gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Some employers have policies against such discrimination — but most do not. It's important to know the law in your state or city, and know your employer's policy before coming out at work.

It's not always easy to come out on the job — even if you've already come out to your family and friends. When Linda Villarosa went to work at *Essence* magazine, she was afraid to come out to her boss and colleagues — even though she had come out in college a few years earlier. But, once again, she found she couldn't stand hiding any more, and she took the chance. "My boss and I were in her car coming back from a weekend editorial retreat, and she was saying something about fixing me up with her brother-in-law. And I just blurted out, 'I'm a lesbian.' She was embarrassed about the brother-in-law and very kind. And that Monday, I came out to just about everybody else at work, and everyone was fine."

While some workplaces can be supportive, it's important to remember that, currently, only 14 states and the District of Columbia have laws protecting you from discrimination based on sexual orientation, and approximately 65 cities and three states have laws protecting you from discrimination based on gender identity.

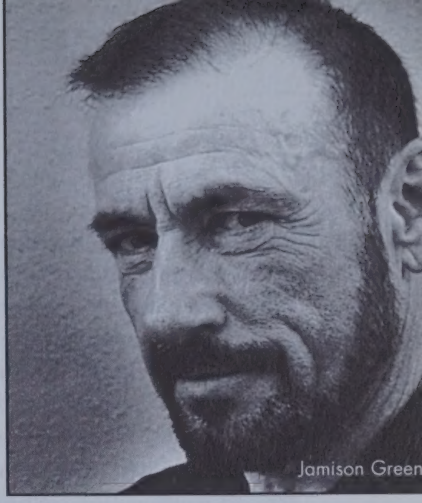
At the federal level, the Human Rights Campaign is working with Congress to pass a measure called the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. ENDA would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. For now, however, use your best judgment when coming out at work. If you feel comfortable enough, you can be an advocate for your workplace to change its non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation and gender identity. For more information, visit HRC WorkNet — a national source of information on workplace policies and laws surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity — at *www.hrc.org/worknet.*

Tammy Baldwin, an openly lesbian U.S. congresswoman from Wisconsin, vividly remembers her fears. "As I came out, most troubling was the thought that in order to live my life and my dreams, I'd have to make a choice ... a choice between pursuing a career in public service, perhaps running for office, and living my life in an open and honest way," says Baldwin.

COMING OUT IN THE MILITARY

If you are a member of the U.S. military, you can lose your job if you come out. If you want to stay in the military, remember that anything you say can be used against you. If you do want to leave, saying the wrong thing may ruin your discharge or result in a court-martial. Some commands have acted professionally and tried to protect service members' privacy. Others, however, have allowed or condoned gossip and harassment against servicemembers who have come out.

You may see coming out as a matter of honesty. Others who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender may feel differently. They may come out and seek discharge as a means of escaping anti-gay threats and harassment — or because they find they are unable to serve in a homophobic military. Whatever your reasons, it's in your best interest to get professional advice before acting. Contact the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network on the web at www.sldn.org (See resources section, p. 39.)


Jamison Green

"Many of us feel we face this choice. At the age of 24, I decided I did not have to make that choice, that I could do both," she recalls. "I could run for office and I could be out. It was a terrifying thought. And it ended up being one of the most freeing things I have ever done."

Remember, that if you press for your rights in the workplace, some supervisors and colleagues may become defensive. That's probably because they are unfamiliar with GLBT-related issues and, like most people, fear the unknown. Ensuring that your conduct is professional and relaxed can go a long way toward reducing fear.

If you are transgender, you may want to discuss your personal situation with a trusted manager, supervisor or human resources professional before coming out to coworkers, says Jamison Green, an activist and transsexual man. "It's also key to maintain your work performance while you are focusing on a transition — although it can be quite hard for some since often they are dealing with considerable stress in their relationships with lovers, friends or family."

Coming Out to Your Health Care Provider

Being honest about your sexual orientation or gender identity can be a matter of life and death — or, at a minimum, essential to getting effective care and treatment. Some of the people who may most need to know the truth about your orientation or identity are your health care providers. Coming out to them can be hard, however, because inaccurate information exists across the medical community about the treatment of GLBT patients.

It can be awkward when a doctor or nurse asks ... what kind of birth control you use.

A number of health care providers still mistakenly presume all patients are heterosexual. As a result, it can be awkward when a doctor or nurse asks whether you are sexually active and what kind of birth control you use. Their ignorance encourages many GLBT people to delay or avoid getting the care they need. And it

keeps many from talking with their providers about promoting good health and preventing disease in an informed, open way.

Transgender and transsexual people also need to be aware that many U.S. insurance companies exclude health care coverage to people who are undergoing medical sex reassignment. Disclosure about your transgender status may be risky if it becomes part of your medical record. Moreover, supportive health care providers face obstacles in giving care and treatment to transgender and transsexual people — who often have to pay for services routinely covered by insurance companies.

If you are not ready to come out to your own health care provider, perhaps you would feel more comfortable talking with a gay-friendly one. Your local GLBT community center may be able to help you. In addition, feel free to contact GLBT health organizations that are willing to educate physicians and protect your anonymity at the same time.

Similarly, if you have a therapist, make sure he or she is knowledgeable about issues facing GLBT people. A number of providers remain ill-informed, particularly about transgender issues — and could give inaccurate or damaging advice. Many professionals, when working on such issues, use a set of guidelines compiled by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association. A growing number, however, treat transgender clients by getting their informed consent.

It's important for you to ask your doctor if she or he has experienced working with a transgender patient's transition — and whether it has been from male to female or female to male. It's also a good idea to consult transgender organizations or friends before choosing a doctor or therapist. In addition, it's important to understand that there is no right or wrong way to transition. It's your own process. Whether you choose to take hormones or to have sex reassignment surgery, it's OK. Do whatever is comfortable to allow you to be true to yourself.

Spirituality and Coming Out

Many people find strength and support from their faith as they struggle to come out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. At first, this might sound like a contradiction since many organized religions teach that homosexuality and gender variance are wrong or immoral. But there are also a growing number of organized religions changing their positions on homosexuality, includ-

ing the country's largest Jewish group — the Central Conference of American Rabbis — which took the lead in sanctioning gay unions during its annual meeting in March 2000. The 3.6 million-member Presbyterian Church U.S.A. defeated a proposal that same month to bar clergy from officiating at same-sex marriage ceremonies. Regardless of what religion you are, most religions also teach that God is merciful.

Former youth activist Jamie Nabozny was raised Pentecostal and hoped to become a minister. But he was gay and thought the only worse thing he could be was Satan himself. So he tried to put his same-sex attractions aside until, one day, he could deny them no longer.

"I walked as far as I could into a big field. I was crying, praying and hollering at God. I said, 'I've read the Bible, I've prayed, I go to church three times a week. Every time I have a homosexual thought, I rebuke it in the name of God and yet still I'm gay. Either you're not there, or you don't give a damn that I'm gay.' It took me a little while but then I realized God was OK with it. The God I really believed in was not a God that hated or condemned people."

"The God I really believed in was not a God that hated or condemned people."

This is an experience many people go through. Faced with a conflict between their religion and their feelings, they come to realize that the God they truly believe in could never condemn people for loving. Some people find their spirituality even helps them come out.

Comedian Suzanne Westenhoefer says she and her sister, a born-again Christian, have made progress over the last 10 years or so — despite her sister's discomfort about Westenhoefer's being openly gay. It has taken time, however, she says. "We're adults now and we try to find common ground in other places in our lives. We're trying to move forward." But Westenhoefer notes she always insists that her sister, no matter what her beliefs, treat her with full respect.

Members of all faiths and denominations are increasingly reaching out to the GLBT community. As they come out, many find it helpful to contact and get involved with a supportive group in their local area. (The list on p. 35 may help you.)

RESOURCES

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Affirmation (Mormon)
www.affirmation.org
P.O. Box 46022
Los Angeles, CA 90046-0022
323/255-7251

Affirmation (United Methodist)
www.umaffirm.org
P.O. Box 1021
Evanston, IL 60204

Al-Fatiha Foundation (Muslim)
www.al-fatiha.org
P.O. Box 33532
Washington, DC 20033
202/223-3738

Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
www.wabaptists.org
P.O. Box 2596
Attleboro Falls, MA 02763-0894
508/226-1945

Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns
www.webcom.com/bmc/welcome.html
P.O. Box 6300
Minneapolis, MN 55406
612/722-6906

Dignity/USA (Catholic)
www.dignityusa.org
1500 Massachusetts Ave., NW,
Ste. 11
Washington, DC 20005-1894
800/877-8797

Emergence International (Christian Scientist)
www.emergence-international.org/
P.O. Box 26237
Phoenix, AZ 85068-6237

Evangelicals Concerned with Reconciliation
www.ecwr.org
P.O. Box 19734
Seattle, WA 98109-6734
206/621-8960

Gay Buddhist Fellowship
www.gaybuddhist.org
2215 – R Market St., P.M.B. 456
San Francisco, CA 94114
415/974-9878

Integrity (Episcopalian)
www.integrityusa.org
1718 M St., NW
P.O. Box 148
Washington, DC 20036
800/462-9498

Lutherans Concerned
www.lcna.org
P.O. Box 10197
Chicago, IL 60610

More Light Presbyterians
www.mlp.org
P.M.B. 246
4737 County Road 101
Minnetonka, MN 55345-2634
505/820-7082

Office of BGLT Concerns for Unitarian Universalists Association
www.uua.org/obgltc/
25 Beacon St.
Boston, MA 02108
617/948-6475

SDA Kinship International
www.sdakinship.org
P.O. Box 7320
Laguna Niguel, CA 92607
949/248-1299

United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches
www.ufmcc.com
8704 Santa Monica Blvd.,
2nd Floor
West Hollywood, CA 90069
310/360-8640

World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations
www.glbtjews.org
P.O. Box 23379
Washington, DC 20026-3379
202/452-7424

Unity Fellowship Church Movement (African-American)
www.ufc-usa.org
5148 West Jefferson Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90016
323/938-8322

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Advocates for Youth
1025 Vermont Ave., N.W.,
Ste. 200
Washington, DC 20005
202/347-5700
info@advocatesforyouth.org
www.advocatesforyouth.org
www.youthresource.com

Asian Pacific Islanders for Human Rights
P.O. Box 461671
Los Angeles, CA 90046
323/860-8775
www.apihr.org

BiNet USA
4201 Wilson Blvd., #110-311
Arlington, VA 22203-1859
800/585-9368
BiNetUSA@aol.com
www.binetusa.org

Bisexual Resource Center
P.O. Box 1026
Boston, MA 02117-1026
617/424-9595
brc@biresource.org
www.biresource.org

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere
3543 18th St., #1
San Francisco, CA 94110
415/861-KIDS
colage@colage.org
www.colage.org

Family Pride Coalition
P.O. Box 65327
Washington, DC 20035-5327
202/331-5015
info@familypride.org
www.familypride.org

Gay Asian Pacific Support
P.O. Box 461104
Los Angeles, CA 90046-1104
213/368-6488
www.gapsn.org

Gay and Lesbian Medical Association
459 Fulton St., Ste. 107
San Francisco, CA 94102
415/255-4547
info@glma.org
www.glma.org

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
121 W. 27th St., Ste. 804
New York, NY 10001-6207
212/727-0135
glsen@glsen.org
www.glsen.org

Gender Education and Advocacy
P.O. Box 65
Kensington, MD 20895
301/949-3822 (#8)
info@gender.org
www.gender.org

GenderPAC
1743 Connecticut Ave, N.W.,
4th Floor
Washington, DC 20009-1108
202/462-6610
gpac@gpac.org
www.gpac.org

Human Rights Campaign
1640 Rhode Island Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20036-3278
202/628-4160
TTY 202/216-1572
hrc@hrc.org
www.hrc.org

International Foundation for Gender Education
P.O. Box 540229
Waltham, MA 02454-0229
781/899-2212
info@ifge.org
www.ifge.org

Lambda Legal
120 Wall St., Ste. 1500
New York, NY 10005-3904
212/809-8585
lambdalegal@lambdalegal.org
www.lambdalegal.org

Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force
350 W. 31st St., Ste. 505
New York, NY 10001
212/714-2904
info@lgirtf.org
www.lgirtf.org

Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer
1707 L St., N.W., Ste. 230
Washington, DC 20036
202/332-5536
mautner@mautnerproject.org
www.mautnerproject.org

National Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Centers
12832 Garden Grove Blvd., Ste. A
Garden Grove, CA 92843
www.lgbtcenters.org

National Association of People With AIDS
1413 K St., N.W., 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20005
202/898-0414
napwa@napwa.org
www.napwa.org

National Center for Lesbian Rights
870 Market St., Ste. 570
San Francisco, CA 94102
415/392-6257
info@nclrights.org
www.nclrights.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
1325 Massachusetts Ave., N.W.,
Ste. 600
Washington, DC 20005
202/393-5177
TTY 202/332-6219
ngltf@ngltf.org
www.ngltf.org

LLEGÓ — National Latina/o Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Organization
1420 K St., N.W., Ste. 400
Washington, DC 20005
202/408-5380
www.llego.org

National Minority AIDS Council
1931 13th St., N.W.
Washington, DC 20009
202/483-6622
info@nmac.org
www.nmac.org

National Youth Advocacy Coalition
1638 R St., N.W., Ste. 300
Washington, DC 20009
800/541-6922
nyac@nyacyouth.org
www.nyacyouth.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
1726 M St., N.W., Ste. 400
Washington, DC 20036
202/467-8180
info@pflag.org
www.pflag.org

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network
P.O. Box 65301
Washington, DC 20035-5301
202/328-3244
sldn@sldn.org
www.sldn.org

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States
130 W. 42nd St., Ste. 350
New York, NY 10036-7802
212/819-9770
siecus@siecus.org
www.siecus.org

Zuna Institute
6114 LaSalle Ave #527
Oakland, CA 94611
916/419-5075
info@zunainstitute.org
www.zunainstitute.org

RECOMMENDED READINGS

All Families are Different. Sol Gordon, Prometheus Books.

Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay & Lesbian History for High School & College Students. Kevin Jennings, ed., Alyson Publications.

Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk about their Experiences. Carolyn Welch Griffin, Marian J. Wirth and Arthur G. Wirth, St. Martin's Press.

Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out. Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu, eds., Alyson Publications.

Bisexual Resource Guide. Robin Ochs, ed., Bisexual Resource Center.

Coming Out: An Act of Love. Rob Eichberg, Plume.

Coming Out to Parents: A Two-Way Survival Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents. Mary V. Borhek, Pilgrim Press.

Coming Out While Staying In: Struggles and Celebrations of Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals in the Church. Leanne McCall Tigert, United Church Press.

Does Your Mama Know? An Anthology of Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories. Lisa C. Moore, ed., Redbone Press.

Free Your Mind: The Book for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth and Their Allies. Ellen Bass and Kate Kaufman, HarperCollins.

GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens. Kelly Huegel, Free Spirit Publishing.

The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities. Delroy Constantine-Simms, ed., Alyson Publications.

Is It a Choice? Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gay and Lesbian People. Eric Marcus, Harper San Francisco.

Lambda Gray: A Practical, Emotional and Spiritual Guide for Gays and Lesbians Who Are Growing Older. Jeanne Adleman, ed., Newcastle Publications.

Mom, Dad, I'm Gay: How Families Negotiate Coming Out. Ritch Savin-Williams, American Psychological Association.

My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely. Kate Bornstein, Routledge Press.

Now That I'm Out, What Do I Do? Thoughts on Living Deliberately. Brian McNaught, St. Martin's Press.

Now That You Know: What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality. Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Out & About Campus: Personal Accounts by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender College Students. Kim Howard & Annie Stevens, Eds., Alyson Publications.

Outing Yourself: How to Come Out As Lesbian or Gay to Your Family, Friends and Coworkers. Michelangelo Signorile, Fireside.

Passages of Pride: True Stories of Lesbian and Gay Teenagers. Kurt Chandler, Alyson Publications.

Straight Parents, Gay Children: Inspiring Families to Live Honestly and With Greater Understanding. Robert A. Bernstein, Thunder's Mouth Press.

Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue. Leslie Feinberg, Beacon Press.

True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism: For Families, Friends, Coworkers and Helping Professionals. Mildred L. Brown and Chloe Ann Rounsley, Routledge Press.

Two Teenagers in Twenty: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth. Ann Heron, ed., Alyson Publications.

A Woman Like That: Lesbian and Bisexual Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories. Joan Larkin, ed., Perennial.

HOTLINES

The Trevor Helpline
1-866-4-U-TREVOR

National Gay and Lesbian Youth Hotline
1-800-347-TEEN (8336)

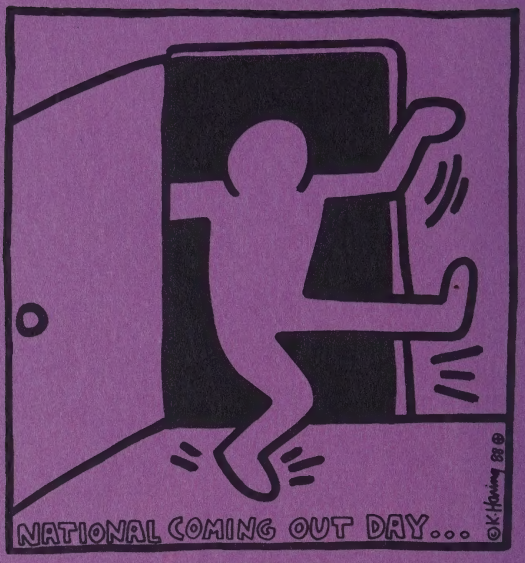
Gay and Lesbian National Hotline
1-888-843-GLNH (4564)

National AIDS Hotline
1-800-342-AIDS (2437)
1-800-344-7432 (Spanish)
1-800-243-7889 (TTY)

For more copies of the *Resource Guide to Coming Out* or more information on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation and its National Coming Out Project, please contact us at 800/866-NCOD, ncop@hrc.org or 1640 Rhode Island Ave., N.W., Washington DC 20036.

Spanish-language versions of the guide are also available.

A VERY SPECIAL THANKS to our contributors for so graciously sharing their experiences.



OCTOBER 11

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